



Helping Friends In Trouble: Stress, Depression, and Suicide

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We all have bad days, or weeks, or even months. We all feel "bummed out" at times. Things usually get better. Sometimes that's hard to remember when you're down. But stress, depression, and even suicide happen in the lives of people young and old.

Problems get people down. We feel tense, fearful, or angry because things are changing—they seem out of control. It's hard to manage. More than 2,000 Minnesota junior and senior high school students in Minnesota were asked how they handle serious problems in their lives. Can you guess what they said? They either try to handle the problem themselves or talk to their friends. It's important to think about how to help yourself as well as a friend who comes to you.

HOW PEOPLE REACT TO STRESS AND PROBLEMS

Failure on a test, a fight with a friend, an argument with a parent, or a put down by a teacher can be upsetting. Many things that cause problems are beyond our control: parents divorcing, a family moving away, the death of someone close to us, or family financial problems. We all know someone who has broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, feared pregnancy, gotten in trouble with the law, or felt utterly deserted and alone.

There are three basic ways of reacting to the problem:

- You can get angry—scream, shout, throw things, start a fight, or go on a rampage.
- You can withdraw—take a drink, shut up in a room, take a pill, daydream, stop talking to everyone.
- You can take charge—think out the problem, try to find a solution, ask for help, or work for change.

UNHEALTHY WAYS TO REACT TO PROBLEMS

Aggression and anger get attention. Striking out at whomever seems responsible for the problem brings temporary relief. But aggressive actions, like drinking too

much, driving recklessly, swearing at people, and breaking up things, can cause trouble in the long run. They don't usually solve the problem.

Withdrawal can also be destructive. It's normal to react, "Just leave me alone!" But if it goes on for a long time, we are without what we need most—sharing, understanding, and help. Alone with a problem, we feel like no one cares. We're just worthless. The depression and anger become worse.

HEALTHY WAYS TO REACT TO PROBLEMS

When your stomach churns, your head aches, and fear creeps through your insides, your mind and body are reacting to stress. There are a number of things you can do. You can:

- talk to someone you trust
- share what is bothering you
- listen to music and relax
- get some physical exercise
- do something that normally gives you pleasure
- give yourself a chance to think

These are first-aid actions. They don't solve the problem, but you can blow off some steam.

Once that's done, it's a good idea to get in touch with someone you trust and respect. This could be a friend, a friend's parent, a coach, or someone you work with. Go have a good talk; lay out the problem and try to figure out some ways to solve it.

WARNING SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Be aware of real trouble signs. Any one of these alone, lasting only a short time, is normal. But if you know a friend with several of these problems lasting more than a couple of weeks, they may be nearing a crisis. They need help. The warning signs can include:

1. avoiding friends, activities, school, social events
2. totally unable to think of anything but the problem
3. unexpected outbursts of anger or crying
4. unable to sleep; always feeling exhausted, irritated

5. unable to eat; or eating and vomiting
6. escaping by sleeping or day dreaming all the time
7. severe behavior change—quiet person becoming wild or active person becoming withdrawn
8. excessive use of drugs or alcohol

There are four other signals that should be taken particularly seriously because they are:

SUICIDE DANGER SIGNALS

1. Threats or talk of killing themselves.
2. Preparing for death—giving away prized possessions, making a will, writing farewell letters, gathering pills, or saying goodbye.
3. Talking like there is no hope even in the future.
4. Acting or talking like not a single person cares; completely giving up on themselves and others.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP A TROUBLED PERSON

Be willing to listen. Take the time and really pay attention. You don't have to have all the answers. Just listen.

Take the problem seriously. Even if the problem doesn't seem real important to you, it may be important to them. Things may be piling up. Show them you understand.

Don't put them down. It doesn't help to say, "Things will be better tomorrow" or "Keep your chin up!" Their problem is real to them.

Encourage them to talk to other people as well as to you. Offer to go along with them to talk with a some adult friend they can trust.

Offer to join the person in some activity they normally enjoy. They need a chance to have some fun and get their mind cleared.

Let them know you care. They may try to put you off. Stay in touch. Reach out. Invite them to do things with you. Don't force them to be cheerful. Stick with them.

DOS AND DON'TS IF A PERSON THREATENS SUICIDE

Take the threat seriously. Insist on getting help. If they don't agree to help themselves, then you need to go to someone who can help.

Do not agree to keep suicide thoughts or threats a secret. Keeping the secret won't help the person. And you cannot bear the responsibility if they do hurt or kill themselves.

Don't try to call their bluff. It may not be one. Reinforce the fact that you care about them and insist they get help.

Let them know you care they are alive.

BEING A HELPING FRIEND

It is important to remember that you cannot be responsible for another person's actions when they are stressed, depressed, or suicidal. Whether they are crying out for help or suffering silently in despair, only they can help themselves. What you can do is be the most caring and responsible friend possible during the hard times. This means listening to their concerns, supporting them, and helping them get skilled help from a trusted and capable adult friend.

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